

# No sex please, for the love of Ceres

Sharon Marshall

The *Amores*, Ovid's first foray into the elegiac genre, bear all the hallmarks of his literary virtuosity. A poet in love with his own genius, he skilfully blends innovation and tradition, exploiting the literary past to breathe new life into love elegy and put his own unique spin on the now well-worn genre.

*Amores* 3.10 – a somewhat odd and amusing poem on abstinence from sex during the festival of the goddess Ceres – is no exception. But scratching beneath the surface dynamism, Sharon Marshall finds a poem which, in its Augustan context, also delivers a biting political sting.

*'Here comes the annual festival of Ceres: my girl lies alone in an empty bed. Golden Ceres, fine hair wreathed with ears of wheat, why must your rituals spoil our pleasure? All peoples, wherever, speak of your bounty, goddess, no other begrudges good to humanity less (Am. 3.10.1–6, trans. A. S. Kline).*

*Amores* 3.10 is a masterpiece of literary transformation, which plays to the image of the learned poet composing his poetry at a cluttered desk and brilliantly reworking his literary models. The beginning of the poem is, in many ways, typically Ovidian, as the cheeky and self-interested poet complains that he is forced to sleep alone during the festival of Ceres. Taking this enforced separation as his starting point, Ovid impudently asks Ceres why she should expect chastity from her worshippers, given her own erotic misadventures, which he will go on to describe. What follows is a somewhat more respectful digression on Ceres' abundant gifts to humankind (*Am.* 3.10.7–14), before Ovid launches into the story of her ruinous passion for the Cretan prince Iasius and how it led her to neglect her duties as goddess of the harvest (*Am.* 3.10.19–42).

## That time of year again

'Here comes the annual festival of Ceres', Ovid complains, referring to the yearly rite of Ceres (*sacrum anniversarium*

*Cereris*). It had been celebrated by the married women of Rome since around the third century B.C. and was associated with chastity and fertility. There is, of course, a certain irony in the fact that Ovid will use the occasion of a festival associated with chastity to regale us with a tale of the goddess's passion. We know that participants in the festival ritually re-enacted the myth of the rape of Proserpina, daughter of Ceres, and her return to her mother – a story dating back as far as the sixth century B.C. (Demeter and her daughter Persephone being the Greek equivalents of Ceres and Proserpina). Ovid alludes briefly to this aspect of the festival when he petulantly asks Ceres near the end of the poem:

*'Because you were sad on lonely nights, golden goddess, why should I be forced now to endure your rites? Why should I be sad, when your daughter's found again, her fate to rule a kingdom second only to Juno's? This festive day calls for loving, and poetry, and wine: these are the gifts it's right to carry to the gods' (Am. 3.10.43–8, trans. Kline).*

## Tradition and innovation

In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, grief and anger at the loss of her daughter cause the goddess to vengefully inflict famine

upon the world. In *Amores* 3.10, the outcome of Ceres' neglect of the world beyond Crete is strikingly similar: fields are sown and ploughs are pulled by oxen, but all in vain as the crops fail. The cause is clearly different, as Ceres' sole motivation here is love. But the consequences are equally disastrous. Ovid has thus subordinated the better-known myth of the rape of Proserpina to the less common story of Ceres' passion for Iasius. Even so, there remain some elements of continuity between them.

Formally, Ovid retains something of the hymnic quality of the *Homeric Hymn*, as the six couplets that form the poem's frame – three at the beginning and three at the end (all quoted above) – clearly mirror one another. In both sets, Ovid repeats the idea that the festival of Ceres forces him to sleep alone; he asks Ceres why she should insist on this; and he refers to her as *flava* (golden). This kind of balanced framing device is typical of the *Homeric Hymns* and provides a clear example of the way in which Ovid blends tradition and innovation.

## The passion of Ceres

The lesser-known story of Ceres' passion for Iasius (Iasion in Greek) is first found in Homer's *Odyssey*, which includes only the briefest account of their affair and the

*Ovid seated at a table and writing into a book; after a painting by Kupezky, 1736. Mezzotint. © Trustees of the British Museum.*

subsequent wrath of Zeus:

*'And so it was when fair-haired Demeter, yielding to her desire, lay down with Iasion and loved him in a thrice-ploughed field, it was not long before Zeus found out, who struck him down with a hurl of his bright thunderbolt' (Od. 5.125–8).*

Aside from another fleeting mention of the story in Hesiod's *Theogony* (969–71), there are no other extant sources for this mythological narrative. It seems then, that the raw material for Ovid's tale comes from epic, as is often the case, but here it receives a distinctly un-epic treatment as Ceres is transformed into an elegiac hero-

ine undone by her passion.

### An Ovidian Dido?

When Ovid finally begins this part of the narrative, the beautiful and bountiful goddess of the harvest we encountered at the start of the poem gives way to a more human and vulnerable figure who is every bit as susceptible to the agonies of love as her mortal counterparts. Upon seeing Iasius hunting deer below Mt Ida, Ceres is, in typical elegiac fashion, seized by the flame of passion that burns to her very core:

*'She saw Iasius on the slopes of Cretan Mount Ida, slaughtering the game with unerring hand. She saw him, and flames pierced her to the marrow, from there, love, partly drove out her shame'* (Am. 3.10.25–8, trans. Kline).

Earlier in the literary tradition Iasius was not a hunter, but a farmer. So why does Ovid make this change?

The image of the deer-hunter in this context might well recall a scene from Virgil's *Aeneid* which, like Ovid's *Amores*, was also written under the emperor Augustus. After the fall of Troy, on their way to found a new home, Aeneas and his followers wash up on the shores of Carthage where they are warmly welcomed by the Carthaginian queen, Dido. After some divine manipulation by the goddesses Venus and Juno, Aeneas and Dido fall in love, with Dido's love becoming all-consuming and causing her to neglect her role as ruler. Virgil famously likens Dido (whose passion has also burned to her very marrow), to a wounded deer, pierced by the hunter's arrow. And just as Dido's attentiveness to Carthage turns to neglect in the wake of her love for Aeneas, so Ceres' neglect of everywhere but Crete – likewise owing to her dalliance with Iasius – leads to widespread crop failure and famine. It is also worth noting in this context that the wounded deer to which Dido is likened in the *Aeneid* is pursued through *Cretan* groves which are then recalled in the Cretan locale for Ceres' undoing, which Ovid emphasizes no less than five times.

### Blurring boundaries

This is not the first time, however, that we encounter the goddess Ceres in Ovid's *Amores*. She is, in fact, present in the very first poem in book 1. Here, in a witty variation on a standard elegiac *recusatio* (a refusal to write more patriotic poetry such as epic), Ovid claims that, having embarked upon an epic work, Cupid

forced him into writing elegy: 'Cruel boy, who gave you power over this song?' Ovid asks, while criticizing Cupid for interfering in the serious business of writing poetry. After all, he continues, the other gods all stick to their respective spheres:

*'Who'd approve of Ceres ruling the wooded hills / with the Virgin's quiver to cultivate the fields?'* (Am. 1.1.9–10, trans. Kline).

The quiver-bearing maiden here is Diana, goddess of hunting, and Ovid makes it clear that her role is not interchangeable with that of Ceres; each has their own appointed sphere of influence.

There is enormous irony then when, in *Amores* 3.10, Ceres steps outside of her customary role as goddess of the harvest, and is transformed by Ovid into an elegiac heroine, brilliantly reworking a brief story he found in the epic tradition. Where once, in *Amores* 1.1, Ceres had been a figure for clear generic distinction (according to which elegy has no business interfering in epic), she now represents something much less stable. It is tempting to see something very self-conscious about reprising Ceres' role here, in this final book of the *Amores*, in which the tug of war between epic and elegy for Ovid's affections looms ever large.

### Private vs public affairs

Dazzled by Ovid's literary genius, we might run the risk of neglecting the other ways in which this story might resonate. However, turning back to Dido and Aeneas, we see there an inherent tension between public and private. Just as Dido, ruled by passion, has neglected her public duty to her people, so too has Aeneas, and Jupiter is forced to send the messenger god Mercury to remind him of his mission to found Rome. Suitably chastened, Aeneas leaves Carthage, resulting in the tragic suicide of the abandoned Dido. Thus public duty wins out over private emotion, but it comes at devastating cost.

Roman love elegy as a genre regularly speaks to this same tension, controversially advocating a life of *otium* (leisure) over *negotium* (business) – a flagrant inversion of Roman social order that insisted on placing public interests above interests of the self. We might also see this tension at work in *Amores* 3.10 on two different levels. Like Dido, Ceres' passion for Iasius sees her torn between desire and concern for reputation ('love, partly drove out her shame'). But this is not the only public/private tension we might observe here, as Ovid draws attention to and cheekily bemoans the way in which the public worship of Ceres has seriously inconvenienced him and disrupted his sex life.

### The Augustan context

Ovid's last point is clearly in itself controversial, but it is not quite the full story. Ceres is a figure closely associated with the emperor Augustus in this period and, although some scholars have insisted that this poem is not a response to contemporary politics, we might stop to think again. In fact, it is possible that the connection between Ceres and Augustus does put a subversive spin on the story of Ceres' passion. After all, Ovid's *Amores* were published in around 16 B.C.; here, it is relevant that, at some point between 31 and 19 B.C., Augustus was initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries – the secret religious rites for the cult of Demeter and Persephone. According to Tacitus, Augustus also undertook the restoration of the temple to the gods Ceres, Liber, and Libera. A marble portrait bust, now in the Vatican museum, even depicts Augustus wearing the *corona spicea*, a crown made of wheat stalks and one of the most recognisable attributes of Ceres. Significantly this is exactly how Ceres is described at the start of Ovid's poem – her *fine hair wreathed with ears of wheat*.

This association is presumably designed to guarantee, through the figure of the Emperor, Ceres' continued abundant gifts to mankind. But crucially, Augustus' wife Livia – commonly upheld as the paradigm of wifely chastity and virtue – was also identified with Ceres on coins and cameos, again wearing the *corona spicea* or holding wheat stalks. We can, of course, fail or choose not to see beyond Ovid's literary innovation in this poem. For, in making the connection to Augustus, we ourselves become complicit with the insolent poet. But, as Augustan ideology promotes chastity and advocates a return to old-fashioned family values, what better way to disrupt the imperial myth-making enterprise than to tell the story of how one of the emperor's most beloved goddesses did not practise the chastity to which she now subjects her worshippers?

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